

---

# Teaching about Religions in State History Courses: The Religious Contours of California and Illinois

JOHN K. SIMMONS

From this article, teachers can learn how to include the study of religions naturally in state history courses. I am presenting the "religious contours" model developed and implemented at the University of California at Santa Barbara and adopted successfully for use in Illinois at Western Illinois University. Readers will quickly recognize that the religious contours model is applicable to every state history course in the United States.

Before I present the model and illustrations of its applicability, let us consider how and why the study of religions generally is avoided in public schools, review United States Supreme Court decisions that encourage the study of religions in public schools, and discuss what is involved in the academic study of religions. This exercise should dissipate the fears and reservations most teachers experience when they consider teaching about religions in their courses and enable them to approach the task with a sense of confidence.

## Background

To teach or not to teach? In terms of religion, that has definitely been

the question occupying the attention of the Supreme Court since 1948. A series of important decisions—from *McColum* in 1948 to *Schempp* in 1963—decidedly shaped the relationship between religion and public education in our time, and, for the most part, the relationship has been dysfunctional. Each decision was argued on the basis of the "establishment clause" of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that reads, "Congress shall make no law regarding establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . ." But it has been confusion over the Justices' will in *Abington* vs. *Schempp* that is our first reason why the topic of religion has disappeared from public classrooms. And again, as we shall see, at the heart of the confusion is the difference between teaching religion and teaching about religions.

Looking back on my pre-*Schempp* years in public high school, I find it almost unbelievable, given the separation of church and state guaranteed by the First Amendment, how our school day began. Over the public address system, which produced a scratchy, overbearing noise designed to permeate every corner of the high school, a

student leader—captain of the football team, cheerleader, etc.—would read ten verses from the Bible and lead the student body in the Lord's Prayer! Mr. Schempp objected to such practices in the Abington, Pennsylvania, public schools on the grounds that decidedly Christian prayers and Bible reading amounted to an "establishment" of the Christian perspective in a public institution. The Supreme Court backed him up. Sectarian prayer—that is, prayer that promotes a particular religious group (sect)—and Bible reading would no longer be permitted in public schools.

Although conservative Christians and political demagogues howled that the Court had tossed God out of the schools and replaced Him with a godless humanistic world view, public school officials and textbook publishers interpreted the decision in a most unfortunate manner. The subject of religion became taboo. Like the fabled three monkeys, in the public schools we would see no religion, hear no religion, speak no religion. All parties failed to note a most important part of the brief written by then Associate Justice Tom Clark. "It might be said that one's education is not complete without a study of com-

parative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment" (*Abington Township School District v. Schempp* 1963). Well-meaning people had confused teaching or practicing religion with the academic, objective study about religions. And Justice Clark's eloquent call went unheard.

Part of the reason United States citizens on both sides of the issue reacted the way they did in expunging religion from the public sphere is something sociologists call privatization—a second reason why the study of religion has disappeared from our schools. Privatization is part of a rather complex sociological process, but, essentially, it means that religion has been pushed into the private sphere. It is something that is a person's own business and should not be bandied about in a public institution like the public schools. Once again, the confusion between being religious and teaching about religions arises.

Certainly one's world view is both personal and protected in our society. But religion, throughout history, may, arguably, be the most important determinant of human behavior; the cultural catalyst behind the rise, and fall, of the world's great civilizations. It has inspired the greatest artists and inflamed the most savage tyrants. To ignore this all-important subject area because it is deemed private militates against the entire educational process, especially in the social sciences.

Yet another point of confusion arises in the ever-present church-state debate. Somehow, the question of teaching about religion in public schools has been erroneously linked to issues such as prayer in school, the legality of religious holiday observances, or equal access for students who want to establish extra-curricular

religious organizations on school grounds. Separationists, people who call for a "wall" between church and state, argue that keeping religion out of the public schools actually protects religious institutions and individuals from government interference and underscores the fact that, in a nation with over 1,200 different religious bodies, no state-mandated religious activity could ever honor such diversity. Accommodationists, people who would like to see public institutions be more accommodating to religion, cry that without some spiritual component to education, students will grow up without a sense of values, morality, obligation, and responsibility. They also have accused the public schools of teaching the religion of secular humanism. For them, keeping religion out of the public schools is an infringement on both freedom of speech and freedom of religious expression. Unfortunately, while the two sides wrangle over these issues, the subject of religion has been "suspended" from school.

However, both sides miss the point when they include the academic study of religion in their feisty debate. Teaching *about* religions, as Justice Clark noted, does not establish religion in a public setting nor does it infringe on anyone's private beliefs. When done correctly, the academic study of religion is simply an indispensable part of the educational process. In the social sciences, including state history courses, it is time to make the subject of religions reappear. And as we will see, the religious contours model provides a method for engaging the subject of religion in a constitutionally permissible and educationally sound manner.

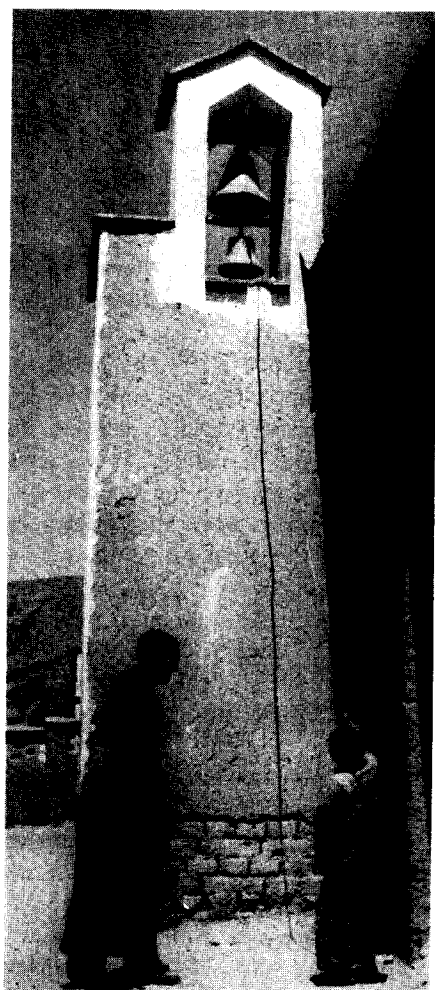
### **Religious Contours of California and Illinois**

In the mid-1980s, the "Religious Contours of California: Mirror to the World's Religions" project was developed by professors in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara (Powell

1986). The goal of the project was to raise the religious literacy of the state of California by designing and introducing religious studies curriculum materials into existing high school courses. With funding from the California Council for the Humanities, religious studies professors, UCSB graduate students in religious studies, and high school teachers from regional school districts (Santa Barbara, Santa Maria, Ventura) met weekly for a semester to develop educational models for including the subject of religion as it naturally arises in existing high school level curricula. My role involved acting as graduate student coordinator and facilitator for the Santa Maria High School seminars.

One of the primary challenges we faced was advancing a model that really did allow the subject of religion to arise naturally in the day-to-day lesson plans of our high school teachers. Again, the pervasive, if erroneous, notion that religion is somehow private or an institution apart from other human activity worked against us. So often, if religion is dealt with at all, the tendency is to treat it as a separate, often unconnected, subject area. But the concept of religious contours implies looking out on the cultural undulations of a complex, institutionally interconnected social environment.

The model we settled on is best described as religious ecology. Instead of the traditional method of studying religions in the cultural context in which they originate—say, Hinduism in India—we investigated in each seminar religions as they exist in distinct communities in California. In all, nine religious traditions and communities were examined: Catholic, native American, Jewish, East Asian, Protestant, Islamic, Eastern Christian, South and Southeast Asian, and distinctively Californian "Spiritual Movements." From the perspective of the social sciences, religious organizations in any cultural environment represent creative human activity that may contribute to or challenge the delicate balance between harmony and discord



The bell tower of an old mission in Southern California

in a given community. Ecology underscores this living, dynamic relationship between a religious organization and its immediate social environment. Put simply, religious organizations change communities; communities change religious organizations. Certainly, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, etc., are recognizable and describable religious phenomena. But in the day-to-day lives of human beings—including the generational span of state history courses—there are no “pure-form” Buddhists or Christians or Muslims. There are people practicing specific forms: Zen Buddhists at a Big Sur retreat; Hispanic Mormon converts in South Central Los Angeles; Hindus lighting incense to the God Vishnu at a traditional Hindu temple

in Malibu; all within a distinct social environment that is affected by and affects religious expression in that community. If religious concerns, historically, have been one of the primary reasons why people form communities, make public policy, and commit themselves to constructive and destructive activity, then a state history course that ignores the subject cannot be considered a viable educational exercise.

To expand on the ecological analogy, we can borrow a lesson from biology 101. Life in a small country pond is anything but a static collection of separate species eking out existence on their own separate biological tracks. At all levels on the hierarchy of life, constant adjustments occur between the impulse toward self-assertion—seeking out that which the organism requires to maintain its life form—and the systemic demand to integrate into the totality of the environment. Ecology teaches us that we cannot really understand an organism outside of the ecological niche in which it lives, moves, and has its being. To put it somewhat facetiously, you can take the frog out of the pond, but you can’t take the pond out of the frog. “Frog” represents the sum total of uncountable relationships that comprise the ecological world of the pond. Like our country pond teeming with life forms, religious organizations are part of a complex web of institutions that make up a given social environment. Whether religion plays a major or a minor role in a particular historical event, it simply cannot be left out of the picture if that picture is to be an accurate portrayal of that event.

The religious contours model, with emphasis on a religious ecology approach, is applicable to any state history course in any state in the Union. More important, it puts public school teachers safely in the area of teaching about religion as opposed to teaching religion. Now that we have explored the generalities of the contours model, we can illustrate particulars with some instances of how the subject of religion naturally arises in

both Californian and Illinois history. As we follow through with this exercise, we can delineate several historical themes that, when identified, will provide a format or grid that a teacher can apply to bring out the historical implications of religious activity in his or her own state.

### Teaching about Religions in the Histories of California and Illinois: Some Key Themes Applicable to Any State in the Union

#### *Theme One: Revivalism and the American Culture Core.*

William G. McLoughlin’s classic account of American religious history, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform* (McLoughlin 1978), offers the fascinating thesis that, since colonial times, the historical changes in American culture have been driven by religious concerns. Economic and political motivations existed, to be sure, but, from the ecological perspective, these institutional forces cannot be separated from the extraordinary religious zeal that turned a fragile set of colonies into the most powerful nation on earth. In essence, this set of ideals, which McLoughlin terms our “culture core,” were expressed by the Puritan leader, John Winthrop, in a sermon he delivered at sea aboard the *Arabella*. “Thus stands the cause between God and us,” Winthrop declared, “we are entered into Covenant with him for this work” (Miller and Johnson 1963). The notion that the purpose, success, and destiny of the American people is based on a special relationship, or covenant, with God has been articulated by the leaders of this country from Winthrop to Clinton. And, at times of cultural turmoil when the nation seemed to lose its way, the culture core has been revitalized through the social ritual revivalism. Called “Great Awakenings” by historians, these thirty- to forty-year periods of religious revival redirected the nation toward a new surge of purpose and progress.



Native Americans in tribal dress performing dances that are part of their religious rites.

As a motivator for historical activity, the idea of a covenanted nation (which certainly reverberates with the grand historical saga in the Hebrew Bible) finds expression in the desire to carve out of the wilderness the perfect society—moral, upright, and prosperous. Ideas have power, and this one, literally, set in motion a nation of men and women committed to building a “kingdom of heaven” on Earth, a kind of quest for perfection in paradise. For example, in California history, it is a little known fact that Los Angeles is made up of smaller towns that were once pristine religious communities started by Protestants from the Midwest. Westminster, Compton, even Hollywood, now connected by urban sprawl and indistinguishable freeways, once represented a variety of Protestant enclaves—Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, etc.—where Christians hoped to reach spiritual perfection in the paradise that is California. Obviously, here is a place in Californian state history where the subject of religion “naturally arises.”

In Illinois, a half-century earlier, Methodist circuit riders, like the great

Peter Cartwright, traveled the river roads exhorting pioneers to “get right with God,” and, in their convincing manner, brought order and stability to settlements in what was, then, the frontier. Here we have another example of how religion is a major determinant of historical activity in state history. It only takes a little digging, but there is no state in the Union not historically and sociologically affected by these elements of the culture core and the accompanying revivalism.

#### *Theme Two: Religious Freedom/ Religious Diversity.*

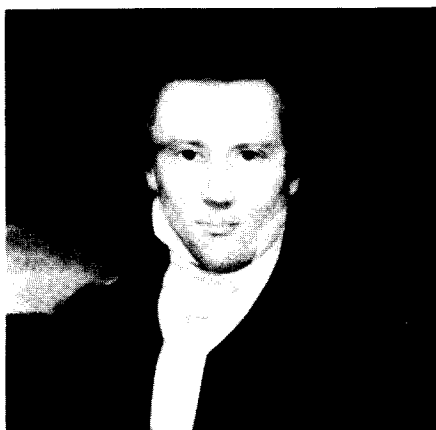
The extraordinary cultural contribution provided by the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, religious freedom, has spawned numerous historical dramas. Because people in this nation are free to embrace a religion of their choice, move to another if that one does not suit them, or even start their own, the history of the nation is replete with fascinating stories. For instance, both California and Illinois state history cannot be fully appreciated unless Mormonism is acknowledged. The

Mormon religion, more properly referred to as the Church of the Latter Day Saints, was, in the 1830s, a new religious movement. Joseph Smith, the founder, not satisfied with the teachings of any other religious organization that he encountered, started his own.

In Illinois during the early 1840s, he and his zealous followers established the largest town in the state, named Nauvoo, along the banks of the Mississippi. As his power grew, non-Mormons became envious of Mormon success. Smith was assassinated at the regional jail in Carthage, Illinois, a catastrophe that eventually prompted the great Mormon trek to Utah. Not only would this story naturally arise in the state history class of an Illinois teacher, but he or she could take the students on a field trip to the restored sites in Nauvoo and Carthage.

Mormons are also an important part of California history. Mormons were some of the first Americans to settle in the state during and following the Mexican War. Under the leadership of a classic American pioneer, Samuel Brannan, Mormons traveled by ship to California landing in 1846 in the sleepy port of Yerba Buena. He and his fellow travelers were among the first Americans to assist in the transformation process that would turn Yerba Buena into a rather well-known city by the name of San Francisco. To the south, a Mormon battalion, sent by Brigham Young to liberate California from the Mexicans in 1847, comprised the first Americans to raise the flag in Los Angeles. As early as 1851, Mormon settlements sprouted in San Bernadino. Obviously, the Mormon story is an indispensable part of the historical contours of these two states. Other states, sites of more made-in-America religions such as Christian Science, Adventism, Spiritualism, Pentecostalism, New Thought, and Scientology, have forms of religion in their history.

Religious freedom has created enormous religious diversity in the



**Top photo:** Joseph Smith founded the Church of the Latter Day Saints in Fayette, N.Y., in 1830.

**Bottom photo:** Brigham Young, leader of the Mormons after 1844, brought the group to Utah where he founded Salt Lake City.

states of this nation. To demonstrate this fact, with a grant from the Illinois Humanities Council, I created a slide-presentation that showed that practically every religion present in the world could be found within the borders of Illinois (Simmons 1988). And, given our discussion of religious ecology, each has a story to tell. State histories are touched by the development of new religious movements, utopian groups like the Oneidans in New York or the Amanans in Iowa, metaphysical groups like the Christian Scientists in Massachusetts, occult groups, and, to bring us to our next theme, religious organizations that arrived in this country in the minds and souls of people who immigrated from another country.

### *Theme Three: Immigration.*

Technically, everyone, even native Americans, immigrated from somewhere else. Each time a new group of people arrived from East Asia, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and so forth, they brought with them different religious perspectives, which, inevitably, reshaped the religious contours of a given state. In California, the Chinese first came to work the gold fields in the 1840s. The ratio of men to women was 100 to 1, so they organized into tongs, which substituted for their familiar village associations. Their religion included a combination of Buddhist, Taoist, Confucian, and shamanic elements, and, today, many of the symbols of these imported religions are evident in Chinatown in San Francisco. In Illinois, history is being made as Vietnamese and Cambodian immigrants turn what were Christian sections of Chicago into Buddhist enclaves.

### *Theme Four: Religion and Power—Multicultural Issues.*

As more and more school boards rightfully demand increased attention to multicultural issues, religion, historically, has played a major role in both empowering and disempowering marginalized groups. The Californian story of native American contact with Roman Catholics provides an opportunity to observe the vast differences between native American ritual practices and the religions imported from Western Europe. In addition, teachers can point out the relationship between religious ideals and behavior in society and illustrate how that potent combination has affected historical events. Again, this is a story replicated in the history of all fifty states.

Because blacks were marginalized in other social institutions, religious organizations provided the only institutional power center and, historically, have produced the leaders in the African-American community. In California, a perfect example is the explosion of African-American-led Pente-

costalism in the early 1900s, which radically changed the demeanor of the cities. In Illinois, the rise of the Black Muslim religion offers an excellent opportunity to investigate the historical events that forced many African-Americans to turn from their Christian roots and embrace Islam as interpreted by Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Louis Farrakhan.

Current members of the feminist movement can look back with pride on the efforts of their forebears in the woman-suffrage movement. In the grand revivalist spirit, women worked within the church on a variety of issues from abolitionism to temperance. Barred from positions of power in male-oriented religious organizations, many others began their own religious movements such as Christian Science, Theosophy, and a variety of New Thought groups. California and Illinois history both include the presence of women religious leaders in these metaphysical religions.

### *Theme Five: Civil Religion.*

Religion is more than what goes on in those unusually shaped buildings that occupy prime real estate in the towns and cities of the nation. Whereas one would not want to compare qualitatively the Catholic mass with the opening of a Chicago Bulls game (in terms of longevity, tradition, and depth of meaning), the fact is that human beings seek out other forms of ritual and symbolism in order to give their lives meaning, purpose, order, and direction. "Civil religion" is a term coined by sociologists of religion to describe religious attitudes that exist outside of identifiable religious organizations. In particular, it denotes a kind of religious patriotism seen in events like the Olympics, the opening of the World Series, Superbowl halftime celebrations, presidential inaugurations, or even displayed in the ever-changing symbolic hues found in the paper plate section of K-Mart. As we travel through our yearly cycle of holidays—Martin Luther King Jr. Day,

Valentines Day, Easter, Memorial Day, 4th of July, Labor Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, the December holidays—teachers are afforded excellent opportunities to allow the subject of religion to arise naturally. Beyond any one type of religious perspective, these holidays are proof positive that all people need ritual, symbolism, respect for tradition, and hope for the future—the stuff of history—to lead purposeful and emotionally sound lives.

### Conclusion

In many ways, the term religious ecology could be restated, in the context of this essay, as historical ecology. When teachers look out on the historical contours of their states, given the above examples, I think

they will find the subject of religion to be an integral part of events, grand and minor, in their states' histories. They need not be concerned about negative repercussions in taking on the subject of religion. Each of the themes suggested here puts K-12 teachers squarely in the teaching-about-religion category. As we have seen in the section on disappearing religion, there is no sound reason for not including the subject of religions in state history courses. In fact, nothing less than the United States Supreme Court is there to back teachers, should any trouble arise. If teachers apply the contours model to state history courses, students, perhaps for the first time in our educational history, will get the inclusive picture of the people who contributed to the development of this nation and the

events that influenced their destiny, and, thus, the destiny of us all.

### REFERENCES

- McLoughlin, W. G. 1978. *Revivals, awakenings, and reform*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Miller, P., and T. H. Johnson, eds. 1963. *A model of Christian charity (1630). The Puritans: A sourcebook of the writings, 2 vols.* New York: Harper & Row.
- Powell, W. 1986. Religious contours of California: Part II. *Religion & Public Education* 13(3): 55-59. (Also see *Religion & Public Education* 13, No. 2 for a description of the purposes, structure, and outlines of the Religious Contours of California project.)
- Simmons, J. K. 1988. Developing public interest in teaching about religion in Illinois: The "religious contours of Illinois" Project. *Religion & Public Education* 15(4): 445-49.

SUBSCRIBE

## The SOCIAL STUDIES

### ORDER FORM

☐ YES! I would like to order a one-year subscription to **The Social Studies**, published bimonthly. I understand payment can be made to Heldref Publications or charged to my VISA/MasterCard (circle one).

☐ \$29.00 individuals ☐ \$47.00 institutions

ACCOUNT# \_\_\_\_\_ EXPIRATION DATE \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE \_\_\_\_\_

NAME/INSTITUTION \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY/STATE/ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

COUNTRY \_\_\_\_\_

ADD \$12.00 FOR POSTAGE OUTSIDE THE U.S. ALLOW 6 WEEKS FOR DELIVERY OF FIRST ISSUE.

### SEND ORDER FORM AND PAYMENT TO:

HELDREF PUBLICATIONS, THE SOCIAL STUDIES

1319 EIGHTEENTH STREET, NW, WASHINGTON, DC 20036-1802

PHONE (202) 296-6267 FAX (202) 296-5149

SUBSCRIPTION ORDERS 1 (800) 365-9753

- The Social Studies offers
- K-12 classroom teachers,
- teacher educators, and cur-
- rriculum administrators an
- independent forum for pub-
- lishing their ideas about the
- teaching of social studies at
- all levels. The journal pre-
- sents teachers' practical
- methods and classroom-
- tested suggestions for teach-
- ing social studies, history,
- political science, economics,
- geography, and future stud-
- ies. Special sections provide
- teachers with extensive re-
- source material in one conven-
- ient source.